

LAND & LIBERTY

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OUR BOURBONS

THE WATCHDOGS of landlordism were well on the prowl in the debates that took place in the House of Commons on 9th and 14th October. The Bill is one of the many successive measures to provide financial aid to agriculture at the public expense. It was naturally welcomed from the landlord side as the way to maintain an artificially high level of rents and land prices. In effect, these grants and doles, this protection and privilege, enrich those who hold the land and it is they who in the end pocket the increased rents and land prices. The actual cultivator whose business it is to use the land and produce things from it is not benefited because in the end he has to surrender the benefits to the landowner or he has to purchase them from the beneficiary if he would be a landowner himself; and as that first charge on all his work has to be met, he is left in no better position than he would have been if agriculture had thus not been protected and dole-fed.

The Bill does two things. It continues the subsidizing of lime for fertilizing purposes and increases the grants for drainage. Thus it definitely instigates and aggravates land speculation. There are many with the funds at their disposal who are eager to buy land partly because they consider such investment in these uncertain days to be safer than to have their property in money tokens which may depreciate in value. They are trying to safeguard themselves against inflation. There are others, probably the majority of land buyers, who notice what the Government has done and is doing under a so-called food-production policy to make land higher in price or rentable at a higher rent. They are gambling with the possibility that this policy will be pursued, developed and made permanent, so that whatever price they pay now for the land, they will be recouped with much profit, without work or enterprise or service on their part "as men grow rich in their sleep," when they offer that land in the market place where men bid against one another for the mere opportunity to gain a livelihood. That is one side of the land speculation which spokesmen of the Government themselves say they deplore and hope to do something to hold in check. Their testimony is no more useful than that of the man who wept as he bolted the stable door after the horse had gone. They weep as they observe the results of their own tremendous folly.

It is mistaken to cry out criminal, as so many newspapers and politicians are doing to-day, against the purchasers of land who are seeking unearned fortunes. It is the mistake of looking only on one side of the shield. For if there were no sellers, there would be no buyers; yet we seldom see any stigma cast upon the necessary partner in the transaction, the vendor. The real estate columns of the newspapers are full of offers of land with all the attractions explained why someone should come along and buy it—"the land is certain to appreciate" is a common tag and

bait. The seller is usually the man who cannot hold on so long; he cannot wait for the fruits of all the Government is doing and what future Governments may do in the interests of land monopolists. He may be even astute enough to think that when there is no longer need for a war-time self-sufficiency, future Governments, and perhaps very speedily, will reverse the present-day policies and give all the citizens a free and unobstructed world market wherefrom to procure their food. He may have that sight of equal freedom and equal right in his own trustful interpretation of the Atlantic Charter. It is not buyer or seller who make the land dear; but criminal public policy which thus puts land value in the market for purchase and sale, for private appropriation, depriving the public of its own revenues, and wearing down those who have to work for their daily bread. Nor is the seller actually selling land. He is selling the law-made privileges which Governments have caused to be attached to land-holding: the subsidies and grants, the stabilized prices, the quotas and tariffs and exchange regulations, the derating and tax-exemption are the things being offered and sought in the market. They distribute themselves so as to give the greatest benefit where the land is most productive and least where the land is poorest in quality. They do anything but assist agriculture; they do everything to swell the rent of the more productive lands. It is terrible to contemplate what is happening to-day in the creation of these new vested interests on top of the old and the crushing power being placed in their hands to hold all industry to ransom—military war succeeded by economic war, the country barricaded and blockaded by the high cost which its own people will have to pay for access to its own natural resources—an enemy in our midst, land monopoly, which will have to be fought as vigorously and beaten off as any that has threatened these shores with fire and destruction.

But to return to the Agriculture Bill. Its other object affects only certain portions of land, namely, those farms or fields which county agricultural committees have taken out of the hands of farmer or owner because the responsible occupier has failed to cultivate them properly. Such land is requisitioned and improved at public cost. Substantial sums of money have to be spent. The purpose of the Bill is to preserve for the Crown the benefit of the money it has spent and prevent the owner from reaping it. The method, the Minister said, was for the State to buy the land "at its original value when possession was taken" and then within five years of the end of the war to offer it back, on sale, to the original owner "or to the person who would have been the owner if the Minister had not acquired it"; and the person who then purchases it will pay the market price of the land with its added improvements, which price will be determined by arbitration. So, it is thought, the State will reap the benefit of its own improvements.

It was here that the watchdogs became most active. They pointed out that the State would be buying land at an "agricultural value" and paying a low price because the land was in a derelict state. But what about the fact that much of this land has sporting value, amenity value, potential building value? Is the owner to be deprived of that through this process of purchase and sale? Is he, when buying back, to pay the market price of the land which includes all its potentialities although when he sold the land to the State he got none of that in the price paid to him? Let us put it in the words of one of these spokesmen, Colonel Mills, the Member for New Forest and Christchurch: "If the owner has sold without regard for amenity or

sporting or building values surely he is entitled to buy back on resale on the same basis, paying a bit more if the land has been improved for agricultural purposes. He should not be asked to run the risk of having to buy it back at building values which were not included or allowed for in the original sale." Another speaker worked up greater indignation, Mrs Tate, the Member for Frome, who said that under the provisions of the Bill: "The State retains to itself not only the increased value caused by the exertions of the Crown, but also whatever accretions of value have occurred up to the date of the resale. . . . When the Government come to resell the land they receive the full post-war value. They eat their cake and have it." The lady cleverly and quickly saw a point that will appeal to the whole body of those who stand rigidly by the privileged interests of private property in land. From the depths up to the stars all belongs to the landowner, and here was a little scheme of the Government which, however ineffectual, was breaching that article of faith. No wonder the lady protested. But her speech was a delightful revelation of the power which the self-same interests have so often denied they possessed. "The House will realize," she said, "that before the war there were large stretches of land which had considerable value as building land (yes, and all of it exempt from rates however valuable!) but which have now been expropriated and that value will not attach to them after the war"; or rather, will not be possible of attachment, under the Bill, by the landowners concerned. The large stretches of agricultural land having a building value—it is when we are really hit that the truth will out.

Brig-Gen Clifton Brown who represents the constituency of Newbury, spoke like a Tory of 150 years ago when the country magnates' toast was "a long war and high prices." He insisted that the only way for the Government to keep agriculture flourishing was to keep up the prices of products of the land and to make that a permanent policy or one for five or ten years. He did not care whether it was by protection or subsidy "or by other means to provide cheap food for the people." They could not have a flourishing agriculture if the prices were not fair to enable those who cultivated the land to live upon it; and they must not do what they had been doing for the last 100 years and let agriculture down. Speeches of that kind were the common stock of the landlords in the Corn Law days, the heritage of the Napoleonic wars, and they were quoted with powerful effect by the Anti-Corn-Law League to sweep the whole rotten robber system away. During the last war of 1914-18 the landlord influence forced upon the country the Corn Production Act and that too was swept away only after it had brought in its train the curse and disasters of a speculation in land values—"England Changing Hands"; Read the Property and Estate Advertisements in *The Times Every Day* was a caption of that period—which had its inevitable result in distress and unemployment lasting over 20 years. It was so obvious that a purely rent-raising policy had been followed and in the artificially boosted prices of land the whole future had been heavily mortgaged. But Brig-Gen Clifton Brown is of the Bourbons who learn nothing and who in their attitudes and obstinacies sow the seeds of revolution.

The country is as it were beleaguered. We are living at a time of total war. Food must be produced anywhere and everywhere and land brought into that use, vacant building sites even city squares and public parks, which in normal circumstances would never be used for the production of food. In this emergency there is no economic specific that would apply to normal times, but only the safety-first compulsion that will

prevent anyone from withholding the opportunities and the means by which food can be produced. But that bribery should have to be resorted to and such bribery that again and in the midst of war "England is Changing Hands" to capture gambling gains not in terms of thousands of pounds but millions and many millions, gains to be wrested from the products of other people's labour, with callous disregard of what kind of peace that will produce: the situation is wholly revolting.

WEST AFRICAN STUDENTS

Resolutions on Land Problems

THE CONFERENCE on West African Problems held at the West African Students Union in London on 29th and 30th August passed a series of resolutions on social questions. Those dealing with land problems were in the following terms:—

This Conference is of the opinion:

1. That land is the basis of life and of all forms of production, and the foundation of the legal and economic system should be to secure the equal rights of every member of the community to the use of land.

2. That the individuals should not be allowed to obtain a greater right to land than a right of use and occupancy.

3. That the right of occupation of land should carry with it a right to the buildings and other improvements made by the occupier (or lawfully acquired by him from the previous occupier).

4. That the right of occupation of land should be conditional upon the payment of a proper rent for the use of the land. In estimating the rent, the value of the improvements should be disregarded. The rent should be revised at frequent intervals so that on the one hand, the occupier should not gain an unearned income from increase of value of land, or on the other hand be penalized by paying too much if the value of land should fall.

5. That the land revenue should be used to relieve the people of tariffs and other taxes on commodities or earnings, thereby improving their economic position.

6. That where rights of property in land have already been granted to individuals, the establishment of a just land system can be achieved by means of taxation of land values, thereby taking for the community the rent of the land while leaving to individuals the undisturbed ownership of the improvements.

7. That all lands within its territorial jurisdiction should vest in the Native Administration as "Trustees" of the Community it rules; but where individual titles to land have become customarily though not yet legally recognised among any native community, as a whole, a scheme for the registration of such titles to land should be introduced and be under the control of the Native Administration concerned.

8. That leases of land to non-Africans should not exceed 21 years renewable at pleasure and good behaviour.

9. That no right or power of transfer in land by way of sale or mortgage be allowed or granted to anyone whether native or non-native. This Conference is thoroughly convinced that this already settled and deeply rooted custom in our communal land tenure should be preserved absolutely intact.

These resolutions are being circulated in the press and otherwise throughout West Africa. A summary of the address of Mr F. C. R. Douglas, M.P., to the session of the Conference devoted to land problems was printed in our last issue.